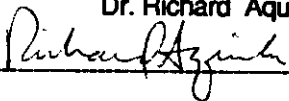


**Either Side of a Thread**  
*A Comparison of the Traditional and Revisionist  
Historic Views of the Cuban Missile Crisis*

An Honors Thesis  
Honors 499

By  
James R. Gast

Thesis Advisor  
Dr. Richard Aquila



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Ball State University  
Muncie, IN

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## **An Introduction to an Era**

In October of 1962 the world came dangerously close to nuclear destruction; arguably as close as it had ever come. The first military confrontation to utilize the swiftly ushered in technology of the thermonuclear age had come close to taking place on the world stage between the two greatest actors of the era: the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Political tensions had grown between the two former allies following the end of World War II. The political, economic and ideological differences between the Soviets and the Americans only served to heighten the apparent suspicion each felt toward the other. Following the Second World War, many nations, either willingly or not, came under the economic, ideological, and military umbrellas of the two dominant superpowers. The two camps tested each other's mettle in several theaters of operation around the globe throughout these formative years. There were varying degrees of depth and scope to these conflicts: from the use of caustic rhetoric, to troop and arms activity. Though some of these incidents involving the new superpowers and their allies, resulted in spilling the blood of men and the blood of theory. None held the breath of the world with the fear of total and swift annihilation as did the confrontation which came to be know as the Cuban missile crisis.

## **The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Brief Overview**

In January of 1959 Cuba's then President Battista had resigned, making way for

the Revolutionary forces of Fidel Castro to take control of the small island nation's government. Shortly thereafter the United States continued economic relations with Cuba, who lay only ninety miles off the U.S. southern shoreline. The following January the United States Ambassador to Cuba formally protested the seizure of American property by the new Cuban government. In July of 1960 Chairman of the Soviet Republics Khrushchev offered Cuba what was termed "rocket support". Castro accepted. In the midst of feverishly supporting their policy of the containment of communism outside the Soviet Union, the United States reacted to this support by embargoing all exports to Cuba with exceptions of medicine and food provisions. The Russian support continued, and by January 3, 1961 the United States had officially severed all diplomatic relations with Cuba. Just over one month later a Cuban /Russian trade agreement was finalized and put into operation.

The President of the United States was advised by his top military counsel as well as by the C.I.A. that there was a solution to latest move by the Soviets to extend their influence into the western hemisphere. President Kennedy, who only a year earlier had defeated staunch Republican conservative and adamant anticommunist Richard M. Nixon in a close presidential race, was advised that if only the people of Cuba were given the chance to oust Castro and his Revolutionary government they would take up such an action eagerly. If the Cuban exiles from the Batista regime who were in the United States were trained and supplied by the U.S, they would be able to launch such an initial revolution against Castro. The American government would need not claim any direct involvement. Once the exiles hit the beaches of Cuba the people would rise up and join them in their cause, or so the C.I.A. and the military

claimed. The operation was scheduled for April of 1961. A sight for the landing was chosen on the southern coast of Cuba, once again to help extinguish any suspicion of United States involvement. The landing would take place at the Bay of Pigs.

The operation went anyway but the way the C.I.A. and the other military counsel lead the President to believe it would go. Castro's Cuban forces were waiting for the exiles when they arrived. The few American aircraft (painted with Cuban markings) that were used were wholly ineffective. The people of Cuba did nothing close to the eager overthrow of Castro that had been predicted. Instead they protected him and his administration. The United States advisors pleaded with Kennedy to utilize American air support to help the operation. Kennedy refused. No direct involvement of the United States military was said to be needed, it would not be risked now. On April 17 the Bay of Pigs invasion was begun. Three days later it had ended in a stunning failure. A few weeks later, as if to add insult to injury for the Americans, Fidel Castro announced formally that he was a socialist on May 1, 1961.

On August 29, 1962 American U2 spy planes flying high over Cuba were able to verify the presence of SAM defensive missiles stations. Wary of how the Soviets might be treating their fellow traveler Castro, Kennedy warned Moscow not to introduce any offensive missiles into Cuba under threat of U.S. reaction. Khrushchev denied the Soviets had supplied or will ever supply Cuba with offensive weapons. The Soviets gave Cuba weapons for her defense only, says the Kremlin. On October 14 of 1962 U2 photographs disclosed Medium Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) launching stations under construction in Cuba. The combination of these missiles, once operable, would be able to strike most

of the continental United States, parts of Canada, as well as some of South America. On October 16 President Kennedy called the first two secret sessions of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, referred to as "Ex Comm". Included in the group of the approximately fourteen people to act as advisors on the newly developed missile situation were Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, CIA Director John McCone, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor, Vice President Lyndon Johnson and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the President's brother.

Ex Comm immediately began discussing several possible courses of action to be taken. The choices ranged from a surprise invasion of the island to not doing anything whatsoever. The group met at all hours and in secret during the first few days, occasionally it met several times in the course of twenty four hours. The committee began to lean toward the idea of a naval blockade of Cuba. The only items that would be excluded from entry into Cuban ports would be anything considered to a component of, or an item necessary for, the completion of the offensive weapons. All other supplies would be allowed to pass. The term "quarantine" was used as opposed to "blockade" for the latter is considered an act of war.

On October 22, 1962 President Kennedy went on television to inform to public of the presence of the missiles and to announce the quarantine. For two days Soviet ships plowed toward Cuba and the awaiting American blockade. The Soviets denounced the American move as hostile and unprovoked. The Kremlin denied any and all claims made by the Kennedy administration. In the two days before the Russian ships were to reach Cuba there was much debate and accusation on either

side. The U.S. accused the Russians in the United Nations of secretly placing missiles in Cuba, severely altering the nuclear status quo. The U2 photographs were shown by the U.S. and denounced by the Russians as fakes. It was finally proven, however, that MRBM and IRBM silo launchers were being constructed in Cuba and that the construction was being performed and supplied by the Soviet Union.

On October 24 the Soviet ships finally reached the U.S. quarantined area. The Russian vessels stopped their engines dead in the water. Ex Comm and President Kennedy waited for the next move to be made by the Soviets. Remarkably, the ships turned around and headed back to Mother Russia. On October 28, after receiving two somewhat different and contradictory offers from the Kremlin, Kennedy agreed not to invade Cuba and Khrushchev agreed to remove all the missiles from the sites. In private Kennedy allowed the removal of United States Jupiter missiles stationed in Turkey to be part of the negotiations. The administration maintained that the removal of the Jupiters was already being discussed before the crisis as they were of questionable operable status. November 20, 1962, the United States announced the removal from Cuba of the last Russian MRBM and IRBM missiles. The world exhaled. The Cuban missile crisis had passed.

### **The Traditionalist and Revisionist Interpretation**

Hundreds of volumes, essays, and articles contemplating the Cuban missile crisis have been written in the thirty two years since those few harrowing days in October of 1962. This paper will focus on several representative examples of this

scholarship. Two diametrically opposed schools of thought have emerged concerning the prudence of judgment of the leaders involved in the crisis, as well as the decisions made by those leaders: the traditionalists and revisionist interpretations.

The traditionalist interpretation condemns the placement of missiles in Cuba by the Soviet Union as an act of direct provocation. The traditionalists applaud the actions taken by President Kennedy and the members of Ex Comm as intelligent, necessary and correct. They portray the outcome of the crisis as an American foreign policy victory. Kennedy himself won praise from the public as well as from the press in the days immediately following the Soviet arms withdrawal.

The revisionist interpretation claims that the people of the United States, the Soviet Republics, and those of the world were brought to the brink of nuclear Armageddon because the Kennedy administration was merely playing a domestic political game. It condemns the actions taken by the American government as mere diplomatic fumbling. The revisionist view also contends that the decision making process used by the United States government in the crisis were wholly unsatisfactory and even dangerous. In this view, the resolution of the crisis was not an American victory, but a classic warning of how not to handle negotiations in the thermonuclear age (Lebow, 161). A more indepth look at these interpretations can give insight into not only this major historical event, but also can provide a compelling detail on how the broader subject of history in general is viewed, interpreted, and remembered.

### **The Traditionalist Interpretation**

The traditionalists (sometimes also referred to as "court historians") seem to

find in President Kennedy at the resolution of the crisis the great leader they thought was within JFK and had yet to emerge. Incidents early on in his presidency, most notably the Bay of Pigs failure, had supporters wondering if the charisma displayed during the debates against Nixon prior to the election would translate into equally impressive statesmanship. Even before the crisis in Cuba some historians were making way for the predicted greatness of the administration to emerge. Historian Herbert S. Dinerstein even took the Bay of Pigs failure and made Kennedy's decisions look prudent and wise. Dinerstein wrote,

"After a brief period of hesitation Kennedy broke off the Bay of Pigs venture because, being basically prudent, he decided the game was not worth the candle. Kennedy's political history, his failure to denounce Senator McCarthy, his careful movement in winning the presidential nomination and the deliberateness of his support for the civil rights movement bespoke calculated caution"(Dinerstein, 232).

It was this "calculated caution" and "deliberateness" that traditionalists found in the decision making process that surrounded the crisis in Cuba.

The first argument most often made by the traditionalist camp seems to be the most obvious and necessary to their overall doctrine: The placement of missiles in Cuba by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics represented a clear and hostile threat and required a response from the United States. Leading court historian, Kennedy Presidential Counsel, and Ex Comm member Theodore C. Sorensen contends that the presence of IRBM and MRBM missiles only ninety miles off the coast of the U.S.

"...represented a sudden, immediate and more dangerous and secretive change in the



balance of power"(Sorensen, 186). Sorensen goes on to claim that the actions by the Soviets clearly and undoubtedly required a response from the United States "...for reasons of national security in the broadest sense"(Sorensen, 186). The missiles placed so close to shores of the United States and placed there in the secretive manner in which they were represented a direct and glaring change in the nuclear status quo. Whether or not the missiles were to actually change the strategic balance between the superpowers is a debatable issue even among traditionalists themselves. Even Sorensen agreed that with the United States clear lead in the arms race at the time, the balance of power was more than likely shifted in appearance only. He was quick to justify that agreement with the idea that "...in national will and world leadership...such appearances contribute to reality"(Sorensen, B, 105). Arguably then for the traditionalist, the missiles represented some kind of threat to the safety of the role of the U.S. as a western hemisphere leader, its citizens and the effectiveness of its international foreign policy. The traditionalist argument now moves into the question of what to do now that a problem of national security has been defined.

A number of crisis solution plans floated around the Ex Comm table. The military advisors sought either an all out invasion of Cuba, or surgical military strikes against the installations themselves. Other factions of the Committee pushed for the use of diplomatic measures utilizing the Organization of American States and the United Nations as mediating bodies. In the early meetings of the group the concept of nonreaction was discussed as a way to halt Khrushchev from inflating the importance of the missiles. This avenue of solution was, however, quickly abandoned. Even Kennedy himself realized the difficulty in coming to a decision everyone in Ex Comm

could, at the very least, live with, if not completely support. The President said at one of the Ex Comm sessions "...whatever you fellows are recommending today, you will be sorry for about a week from now"(Schlesinger, 805). This statement should the tone of the meetings. The members of Ex Comm were under pressure to make decisions quickly. A number of members had changed their minds quickly on the solution they felt was best. Kennedy was expressing concern for the correctness of the decision he would eventually implement given the situation it was made under. Ex Comm began slowly to lean toward a naval blockade of Cuba. For the traditionalists the blockade has been looked at not simply as the lesser of the evils of the other plans, but "...a middle course between inaction and battle, a course which exploited our [the U.S.] superiority in local conventional power and would permit subsequent movement either toward war or toward peace"(Schlesinger, 804-805). It was the ultimate example of diplomatic firmness and flexibility. It allowed Khrushchev time to rethink his actions while keeping any further weapons from entering Cuba. Most importantly, the traditionalists would claim, it left the U.S. in control of the situation. The nuclear ball was now in the Kremlin's court. The Soveits would now have to make the next move. For this school of thought the Russians would either have to pull back or take some kind of aggressor action. The quarantine would either make the Soveits look weak or extremely hostile. The naval blockade of Cuba gave the Kennedy administration "...control over the future"(Schlesinger, 806).

The blockade was put in place and the Soviet ship acknowledged it soon thereafter on October 24, 1962. For three days terse negotiations took place between the Russians and the White House in an extremely tense and anxious atmosphere. On

the twenty eighth of October Khrushchev and Kennedy agreed on terms for withdrawal of the missiles and the retraction of the blockade. The crisis itself was not completely resolved at this time but the most intense segments had passed. Traditionalists reflect on this aftermath period as one of great success and perseverance for President Kennedy and members of the Executive Committee. Some of those closest to John Kennedy during the crisis placed with him praise which equalled him with the great men of history. The Prime Minister of England during that October, Harold Macmillan, had written, "throughout all the pressures, internal and external, to which he was subjected, President Kennedy remained firm and calm" (Kennedy, 18). Secretary of Defense and Ex Comm member Robert McNamara said the work of all the agencies involved from the Kennedy administration "...worked together smoothly and harmoniously," and that the "...performance of the U.S. government during that critical period was more effective..." than at any other time during his seven years as Defense Secretary (Kennedy, 14). Macmillan again gives more kudos to Kennedy on his performance by saying "...his tactics and sense of timing were perfect...President Kennedy really did preserve both Peace and Honour"(Kennedy, 18). These remarks hold tremendous weight for the traditionalist. Prime Minister Macmillan, though not directly involved in the negotiations, was a NATO member. His country would have most definitely felt the shock waves of the crisis, possibly including a nuclear strike, had the situation accelerated from the blockade into full scale military engagements. This is the context in which the traditionalist crisis view holders use the Prime Ministers statements.

The traditionalists maintains the notion that, viewed overall, the Cuban missile

crisis is to be considered an American triumph. The actions of the President are to be praised as cautious, firm, and courageous. He consulted with intelligent and appropriate individuals who returned to him thoughtful, useful, and largely correct information which he used in formulating responses to the aggression presented him. The decisions of JFK and the Executive Committee with regards to their diagnosis of the Soviet build of missiles in Cuba as a threat to the U.S. were correct, and the decision to enforce a naval blockade of the island was the best of all possible tactics presented. The American government showed its allies and foes alike that it is committed to remaining firm in its political posture and would not allow its policy to be compromised so close to home. The traditionalist school claims that the Soviets provoked and the Americans persevered. The West was once again safe due to the efforts and actions of President John F. Kennedy and the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. This philosophy of thought surrounding the crisis may best be summed up by Sorensen,

"Some ask: What if Khrushchev had not backed down? Others say: Why did we settle for so little? The real question is: Where would we be if JFK had not pursued [the course of action he did] and accepted Khrushchev's offer in a way that avoided the need for anyone to back down"(Sorensen, C, 192).

### **The Revisionist Interpretation**

Revisionist Cuban missile crisis theorists dispute each of the claims made by the traditionalists concerning the success of the crisis, as well as bring to light other

symptoms that lead to their conclusion that the crisis was not the sweeping American foreign policy success story court historians are claiming. The revisionists hold fast to the claim that Kennedy needlessly risked war to satisfy doubts about his own international foreign policy image and to bolster his own popularity which would help return a Democratic Congress later in November. They question the threat of the missiles and hold the naval blockade to be an inept and clumsy decision. The use of the Executive Committee during the crisis is also questioned by revisionists, who believe that overall the crisis was resolved due to a moderate Soviet military attitude and sheer luck on the side of America.

The first area of United States policy toward Cuba during the crisis to come under fire by the revisionists was the decision by JFK and Ex Comm that the IRBM and MRBM missiles were a large enough threat to warrant action. One of the first revisionists was I.F. Stone, a Washington journalist whose initial critiques of the crisis have been developed into what today is the current areas of contention between the two schools (Divine, 151). Stone claimed that the Soviet launch stations in Cuba "...did not make that much difference" (Stone, 12). He supported his position with the Horelick Air Force Study, which investigated the strategic importance of the missiles. Stone quoted the study as saying that the launch sites were "...highly vulnerable to a U.S. first strike, even with conventional bombs" (Stone, 13). The Horelick study went on to say that the number of silos constructed in Cuba were far too small to constitute Soviet first strike capability. In addition, the study maintained that given the available technology of the time, the Soviets would have had difficulty in timing the launches of the missiles in Cuba with that of the missiles in the Soviet Union. If the missiles in

Cuba were fired at the same time as those in Russia, the ones from nearby Cuba would have landed so far in advance as to give the U.S. additional, precious warning time (Stone, 16). Even Secretary of Defense McNamara candidly remarked that "...a missile is a missile. It makes no great difference whether you are killed by a missile fired from the Soviet Union or from Cuba" (Abel, 124). The question of the revisionists about the true nature of the missiles actual or perceived threat capability did not rest in the domestic sphere. The problem was raised with regards to the reaction to crisis by the nations of western and eastern Europe, the United Nations, and the members of the Organization of American States, as well as NATO. The United States had its own Jupiter nuclear missiles in Turkey. American Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson "...forecast grave difficulties...concerning the Jupiter bases in Turkey" (Stone, 15). Stevenson said at the White House on October 20 that "...people would certainly ask why it was right for the United States to have bases in Turkey but wrong for the Russians to have bases in Cuba" (Stone, 15). Revisionists also point to the possible perception European nations might have to the reaction of the U.S. to the situation. Stone, ever the consummate revisionist, even quotes the classic traditionalist Sorensen stating "...most Europeans cared nothing about Cuba and thought we were over anxious about it" (Stone, 12). While this statement does seem to arguably have been taken out of context by Stone to suit his needs, he does catch Sorensen asking a very important question, one asked by revisionists themselves: "Would they [the nations of Europe] support our [the U.S.] risking a world war, or an attack on NATO member Turkey, or a move on West Berlin, because we had a few hostile missiles nearby?" (Stone, 14). The revisionist question about the perception of the crisis by

other nations is, in short, would European countries who had so long lived under the nuclear gun of both the United States and the U.S.S.R. understand what all the fuss was about? Stone suggested that the revisionists would answer the same as those European nations: no.

Another point in regards to the actual or perceived threat of the Soviet silos comes as an attack on the Kennedy administration's claim that the missiles themselves were of an offensive nature. New Left writer and Canadian philosopher Leslie Dewart argues that these so called offensive weapons were nothing of the kind. Dewart claims that the distinguishing factor which necessarily makes a weapon offensive is the "...actual possibilities of its being used to attack"(Dewart, 24). He goes on to give an example of a rifle or pistol being offensive in relation to an unarmed man. But, states Dewart, "...the same weapons in the Cuban militia's hands could hardly be considered offensive in relation to the U.S. of 1962"(Dewart, 36). Though Dewart's example and definition may be grounds for argumentation, the point of revisionist thought is made clear: was the placement of missiles in Cuba by the Russians an intolerable provocation as the traditionalists suggest? Were they, the revisionists might ask, even so undoubtedly offensive in nature as the Kennedy administration maintains?

This school of historic thought also takes issue with the way Ex Comm had operated throughout the crisis. Traditionalists long have applauded the fact that Ex Comm operated without an official leader. Everyone in the meetings supposedly spoke as equals. On the occasion when the presence of Kennedy, merely by the nature of his position, made such open discussion difficult he would make himself

conspicuously absent. The revisionists condemn this leaderless style and the fact that few men on the Committee had either military or diplomatic relations experience as a wholly preposterous way to run negotiations, especially given the nature of the ones being run at the time. Former National Security Council member and part time Ex Comm member Dean Acheson expressed these exact concerns, adding that "...this is not the way the National Security Council operated at any time during which I was officially connected with it: nor, I submit, the way it should operate" (Acheson, 76).

The view held by traditionalists about the effectiveness and intelligence of the decision to quarantine Cuba also falls under heavy revisionist scrutiny. The blockade is charged with being wholly ineffective towards the apparent goal of missile removal. It is also diplomatically illegal, charge the revisionist camp. For Acheson the quarantine did not remove the chance of military aggression, it merely postponed it, and in doing so made it possibly more potent. Acheson argued that the quarantine first allowed the Soviets time to finish the launch sites already in progress, and secondly gave the Russians the option of ramming the blockade. This, for Acheson, turned Cuba into a "...combination porcupine and cobra"(Acheson, 76). It left the Soviets in "control of the future", not the United States. For this school of Cuban missile crisis thought the blockade "...was a way a keeping things out, not getting them out"(Acheson, 75). They called the quarantine a "blunt instrument" that was entirely "ill adapted to the purpose" of removing the Kremlin weapons. Dewart added to even these charges in arguing that the mere installation of the blockade by the United States was "glaringly illegal" and that the presence of the 'offensive' weapons in Cuba in no way "violated international law" (Dewart, 38). For the revisionists the quarantine



was not warranted, not effective, and certainly not legal. It was the "last resort of a cornered man [Kennedy]" (Stone, 15).

The final major point presented by most revisionists to further their critical examination of the crisis is not one usually addressed directly by most traditionalists, if it is addressed at all. If the court historians do pay attention to this issue it is usually done as a side note or as a retaliation due some revisionist attack. This final major point of contention centers around the idea that Kennedy took the stance he did in Cuba for domestic political purposes. JFK, it is charged, wished to return a Democratic congress to the Hill and improve his own popularity standings. Sorensen and other traditionalists vehemently deny any domestic political motivations on the part of Kennedy. Sorensen had been quoted as saying as he sat with the President on the back porch of the White House on Black Saturday during the height of the crisis that JFK did not talk of the possibility of his own death "...but of all the innocent children of the world who never had a chance or voice" (Stone, 16). Revisionists are quick to retort that if Kennedy was truly so concerned he might have sacrificed his chances in the election to try and negotiate. Stone bluntly writes "Kennedy could not wait, but the country and the world could" (Stone, 13). Revisionists contend, Stone among them, that if Khrushchev had not backed down when he did, but instead had waited for the decision of a United Nations debate, the Republicans would have accused President Kennedy of being both gullible and weak. Accusations like that could have cost the Democrats their majority in the House of Representatives. Such accusations would be tough obstacles to climb in any time period of American politics. They were especially deadly during the era of the mid 1960's when being considered 'soft on communism'

could destroy a career. Sorensen himself received a note expressing great concern from an unidentified individual (presumably an Ex Comm member) during one of the debates on the crisis which said if the missiles in Cuba were allowed to become operational, the House would more than likely be returned that November with a Republican majority (Stone, 13).

There are others in the revisionist school who agree that Kennedy did more than likely hold the question of the coming elections in his mind throughout the crisis negotiations. They, however, do not feel that this was indicative of some kind of malice on the part of JFK, nor that it was inappropriate. Former Foreign Service Officer and revisionist usually mentioned in the same breath as Stone, Ronald Steel, speaks to this issue:

"It is not to degenerate John F. Kennedy's patriotism to assume that he was aware of such possibilities [that if the missiles were left operational he may have committed political suicide] . Nor is it to question the motives of those who took part in those exhausting, often stormy meetings during those thirteen days. It would have been political folly for Kennedy to have broached the subject of election before Ex Comm where it would have fallen on deaf ears" (Steel, 22).

Steel seems to be the middle ground between the traditionalists portrayal of Kennedy as the political altruist and the hard core revisionists, who tried to portray JFK as some kind of politically evil minded, callous, uncaring leader.

The revisionist view of the Cuban missile crisis attacks the notions set forth by the administration at the time and those by the traditionalists to come directly afterward. They claim that the missiles were not the threat the government said. They

make noise as to whether or not the Russian missiles were technically offensive in nature. They condemn Ex Comm structurally, procedurally, and on its decided courses of action. And finally the courageous image of JFK cultivated by the traditionalists is tarnished with accusations of sheer political gain as motivation throughout the crisis. Overall the methods utilized in the affair are refuted. The individuals involved are accused of "...operating on the basis of limited perspectives and short run calculations" (Stone, 16). It has been charged that the ironic outcome of the crisis was not "this is what to avoid", but that it "...contributed to the euphoria of power the led Kennedy's successor ...to have his own little war in Southeast Asia"(Stone, 16). It has been stated in more recent years that though the Cuban missile crisis was an important event in the world of political negotiations, the times and current situations of political realms throughout the globe have changed so much as to put the crisis into antiquity. Even given this trend in current diplomatic thought, an accusation such that the Viet Nam War, and Lyndon Johnson's decisions about that war, had begun to gestate during the Cuban missile crisis is a formidable one indeed.

In total, the revisionist argument can be broken down into five main points: 1. Kennedy refused to use traditional methods of diplomacy that would have resolved the crisis quietly, 2. He did so because he needed a foreign policy 'victory', 3. the intelligence analysis and data interpretation had been obtuse, 4. the administration did not understand why the Soviets would find it politically advantageous to put missiles in Cuba, and finally, 5. the stakes were not so high as the public was lead to believe.

Revisionists contend that the overall crisis was "...the best of therapies for Kennedy's nagging inferiority complex", and that the "...deeper reaches of the story are

avoided, as if we feared to look too closely in the larger implications" the affair in Cuba would bring out. These implications might, revisionists might say, reveal some flaw in the fabric of the porcelain complexion that is remembered to be one of the JFK administration.

### **Recent Developments**

There have been a number of new developments concerning the Cuban missile crisis in the last decade. The governments of the United States, the former Soviet Republics, and even that of Cuba itself has declassified literally tons of materials formerly unavailable to scholars. This has allowed many facts not known at the time to come to light. It has allowed those involved in the crisis to have a greater understanding of what the other side knew and how that effected the decisions made. It also gives the Russians, Americans, and Cubans the chance to see how their own side was perceived by the other two. The declassification of material has allowed these governments to see how their decisions were perceived and acted upon. It has allowed them to judge whether or not the messages sent out were understood in the manner they were meant. The Cuban missile crisis may now be looked at with greater objectivity and therefore as a kind of case study in brinkmanship.

Another recent event is the Hawks Cay Convention. Held in the last decade, this conference featured the surviving members of Ex Comm, many department members from the Kennedy administration, and even a select group of statesmen from Cuba and the Soviet Union. They assembled to discuss the Cuban missile crisis in the context of its own time period as well as the lessons that may have been learned.

They discussed its importance in regards to what it has to offer diplomats, politicians, and military strategists of the contemporary age.

The break up of the former Soviet Republics has also been useful in the understanding of the crisis. Up until this decade, the contribution by the Soviet government to the objective documentation of the crisis has been minimal. When there was information contributed it was characteristically biased. It was filled with more rhetoric than fact. Within the last two years writers in the former Republics have been allowed greater freedom in working on the Caribbean Crisis, as it is called there, as well as a relatively more relaxed atmosphere in regards to the accessing of information. There have been a number of works by Russian scholars and those using information gathered from Russia published that are true historical records published in the last year.

### **Evaluation of Interpretations**

Both interpretations of the crisis offer thoughtful and thorough examinations. Each overall argument made by the two schools is consistent with the viewpoint put forth by that particular school. There are several areas that do, however, warrant further evaluation.

The revisionists quickly try to dismiss the claim made by the Kennedy administration that the missiles were a threat warranting action. They based this argument on two points. First they argued that the missiles did not truly change the balance of power neither in fact, nor appearance. Secondly they argued that action by the U.S. toward the placement of these missiles would not be understood by the

member of NATO and the United Nations. The reason for this misunderstanding would stem from the U.S. having its own Jupiter missiles in Turkey. Why is it wrong for one country to have missiles close to its adversary, the revisionists asked, and right for the other? One area that this view did not mention in this stage of its argument is the thought process going on in American foreign policy at the time. Kennedy had defeated conservative Republican Nixon in the 1960 elections. Nixon had risen to prominence in his career partly due to his support of Senator McCarthy's political purge of communism in the United States government in the 1950's. The Korean War had also shown the U.S. commitment to its policy of 'containment'. This policy involved the concept of 'monolithic communism'. Any move by a government in the world toward becoming communist was seen as directed by the Soviets themselves. It was the United States policy to contain this communism. The U.S. did not want communist governments existing outside the U.S.S.R. The war in Korea put the Communist backed North against the U.S. backed South in a perfect example of the kind of conflicts with which this policy dealt. For Kennedy not to have at least stated that he and his administration considered this bold move by the Communists to be a threat could have meant the end of his career. Those in the Republican party would have labeled him 'soft' on Communism. In the context of the time this crisis occurred, a label such as that would have had detrimental effects to Kennedy's ability to effectively create and implement foreign policy at least. He could have arguably been voted out of the White House.

This brings up the next part of the revisionist argument that needs to be pointed out. They claimed that Kennedy used the crisis to increase his popularity and to return

the Democratic majority back to the House of Representatives. It seems the information compiled would not necessarily lead to the conclusion that is the major deciding factor motivating Kennedy. It does appear that the politics of the up coming election were, at the very least, in the back of Kennedy's mind. The political motivation should not be seen as a necessarily incorrect or 'bad' one. If Kennedy had not returned a Democratic House in November of 1962 it would have made it extremely difficult to deal with the crisis had it persisted longer. If more military action had been needed it would certainly been more difficult to get the supportive legislation needed from a House Republican majority. The Republicans could have certainly changed their attack on Kennedy once the elections were over if they had won. They could have stopped saying Kennedy was 'soft' on Communism and begun to say he was needlessly endangering the United States. Such maneuvers have been made by both parties throughout many different military conflicts in U.S. history. Asking a political leader not to think politically is not easy to do. The revisionists seemed to want Kennedy to go from hardnosed statesmen to some kind of President-in-a-vacuum. This type of jump is difficult if not impossible. It is also not practical for a world leader to consider.

The revisionists do make a better argument in regards to Ex Comm. The traditionalists said the leaderless nature of Ex Comm was an advantage to the decision making process. The revisionists used a number of examples to counter this claim successfully. First they argued the leaderless nature of the Ex Comm meetings were ineffective. Without someone to focus the debates, the arguments got off target or even were made to serve the interests of the departments involved. With a definite leader the meetings could have had an agenda to follow and been more efficient. This

efficiency was vital to correct decision making according to the revisionists. Another point for the revisionists is that the leaderless style of Ex Comm was dangerous. Few of the men involved in the debates had been elected to office. Fewer still had real experience in such diplomatic relations. This is a questionable tactic. It is not to say that the men being consulted by the President were not of high intellect. Nor is it to say that these men were not capable of giving thoughtful, useful advice. It is alarming that the people making the decisions in the crisis were not directly lead by the President in their discussions and that very few of these men outside Kennedy were accountable to the people by way of elections.

Both interpretations make valid claims. The traditionalists seem to be caught up in the sentimental memory of Kennedy and Camelot. The revisionists sometimes seem to want to tarnish this image as much as the court historians wish to protect it. With the recent developments concerning the crisis a middle interpretation seems to be slowly emerging. It takes into account Kennedy's cultural contributions to the U.S. of the early 1960's as the traditionalist would like. This new moderate school also takes the objective approach in evaluating his performance taking into account the sentimental frame of reference. This view can be noticed in Steel's quotation in the revisionists section of this paper. This interpretation has been made possible largely through the continued amount of information being made available, as well as the constructive use of hindsight. One thing that should be kept in mind is that those involved in the Cuban missile crisis at the time did not know how it was going to turn out, recent historians do.



## **Conclusion**

The crisis has something to offer that goes beyond the political arena in which it was conducted. The main purpose of this paper was to reflect on the different ways in which noted scholars view of specific event in history for the purpose of detailing that event in itself. In the process, this study illustrates how history is recorded, sometimes subjectified, and then rebroadcast for the next batch of readers, writers, and students to pour over and contemplate.

The court historians and the revisionists attitudes offer opposing views about the Cuban missile crisis. Their ongoing disagreement demonstrates that the pursuit of history is as active and organic concept. History if the reanimation of an era. It is not the discussion of dusty figures in the nonconsequential past. It is what we as historians and students make it, for better or for not. To say that it is difficult to arrive at a conclusion on something like the Cuban missile crisis is only to prove the point. Each time some event, person, or era is returned to the light of contemporary academe, it is allowed a fresh start and a new appearance. That is what makes history.

## **Chronology**

1 January 1959	Cuba's President Batista resigns; Castro's Revolutionary forces gain control.
15 April 1959	U.S./Cuba discussion on economic relations begin.
11 January 1960	U.S. ambassador protests the Cuban seizure of American property
11 July 1960	Soviet Chairman Krushchev offers "rocket" support.
19 October 1960	U.S. embargoes all exports to Cuba excepting medicine and food.
3 January 1961	U.S. severs diplomatic relations with Cuba.
13 February 1961	Soviet/Cuban trade agreement completed.
17-20 April 1961	Bay of Pigs invasion fails.
1 May 1961	Castro announces he is a socialist.
21 October 1961	U.S. indicates its superiority in nuclear weapons; there is no missile gap.
27 July 1962	Castro indicates Cuba will soon have new defenses against U.S.
29 August 1962	U2 photos verify SAM defense missiles in Cuba.
4-13 September 1962	Kennedy warns Moscow not to place offensive missiles in Cuba.
14 October 1962	U2 photos disclose MRBM and IRBM launch pads under construction in Cuba.
16 October 1962	First two secret sessions of ExComm to advise Kennedy.
22 October 1962	JFK's speech informs public of the missiles and announces naval quarantine.
24 October 1962	Soviet ships acknowledge the U.S. blockade.
26-27 October 1962	Washington receives two letters from Moscow regarding a deal for moving Soviet missiles.
28 October 1962	Khrushchev agrees to remove Soviet missiles and accepts Kennedy's pledge not to invade Cuba.
20 November 1962	U.S. announces removal from Cuba of the last Soviet missiles.

*adapted from Lebow's The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*

## The Executive Committee of the National Security Council

McGeorge Bundy, *National Security Advisor*  
Dean Rusk, *Secretary of State*  
Robert McNamara, *Secretary of Defense*  
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